



Steps To Excellence Program
Promoting Quality Child Care



Steps to Excellence Program (STEP) Accomplishments & Evaluation Report FY 2012–13

Executive Summary

Results from STEP—Los Angeles County's First Child Care Quality Rating and Improvement System for Programs Serving Children Ages 0–5

Prepared by Wold and Associates
with contributions from the Los Angeles County Office of Child Care
and the UCLA Center for Improving Child Care Quality

June 30, 2013



WHY DOES LOS ANGELES COUNTY NEED A CHILD CARE QUALITY RATING SYSTEM?

Every day, parents in our County are seeking care for their young children, and the search for child care can be tough. In addition to finding care that is affordable and accessible, parents lack information on the quality of care that is provided to children ages birth to five.

- Over 3,000 child development centers and nearly 7,625 family child care homes with an estimated capacity to care for 571,000 children ages birth to five exist in Los Angeles County (*Los Angeles County Child Care Planning Committee Needs Assessment, 2011*).
- Yet only seven percent of centers and less than two percent of family child care (FCC) participate in accreditation programs (*Los Angeles County Office of Child Care's Analysis of Accredited Programs, 2006*).
- California's child care licensing regulations are intended to ensure the health and safety of children in care. These regulations do not address the quality of care. A recent national survey ranked California's licensing standards 50th—placing it among the states with the weakest overall scores (*Child Care Aware, Ranking of State Child Care Center Regulations and Oversight, 2013*).

Research has shown that poor and mediocre quality child development services do not benefit young children or their families. It is our responsibility as early educators, parents, employers, and concerned citizens to close the gap between what we know and what we do to support the healthy development of young children.



PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Steps To Excellence Program (STEP) was created by the County of Los Angeles to provide parents with clear, concise information on the quality of individual child care settings. STEP has the distinction of being the first child care quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) in Los Angeles County for programs serving children ages birth to five. Designed by the Policy Roundtable for Child Care and administered by the Los Angeles County Office of Child Care (OCC) since 2007, the STEP QRIS serves both licensed family child care homes and licensed child care centers from the private and public sectors.

STEP's objectives are to:

- (1) Increase early educators knowledge of quality standards and developmentally appropriate practices;
- (2) Increase early educator implementation of quality improvements; and
- (3) Increase parents' knowledge of STEP quality ratings and standards.

STEP has a rich history (see timeline) and draws upon the collaborative expertise and partnership of multiple organizations. Current implementation partners include the UCLA Center for Improving Child Care Quality (CICCCQ) and the Child Care Alliance of Los Angeles (CCALA). STEP is currently funded by Los Angeles Universal Preschool's Early Childhood Workforce Consortium.

STEP Implementation Partnership Model

UCLA Center for Improving Child Care Quality

- Data Collectors
- Reliability Assurance
- Quality Evaluations



LA County Office of Child Care

- Outreach/Enrollment
- STEP Quality Standards
- Professional Development Coordination & Trainings
- Quality Improvement Grants
- Technical Assistance

Child Care Alliance of Los Angeles

- Quality Improvement Coaches
- Outreach Support



KEY PROGRAM ACCOMPLISHMENTS DURING FY 2012–2013

The focus of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2012–2013 STEP Evaluation was assessing progress toward the following outcomes: 1) that child care providers increase their knowledge of quality standards and developmentally appropriate practices; 2) that child care providers implement quality improvements; and 3) that child care providers develop a culture of continuous quality improvement.

The data collection methods included:

- An analysis of administrative data including quality ratings completed and scores;
- A self-administered survey of child care participants conducted in English and Spanish; and
- One-on-one interviews with a random sample of STEP participants conducted in English. Interviews were conducted with nine participants representing various phases of STEP's implementation model and communities throughout Los Angeles County.

The full STEP Evaluation Report for FY 2012–13 is available from the Office of Child Care website at www.childcare.lacounty.gov.

Program Participation

As of June 30, 2013, 245 child care programs actively participate in the STEP QRIS network. Of these programs, 80% (N=196) are family child care homes and 20% (N=49) are child development centers. Programs identified as being “active” are those that have either received a rating as of 2011, or have expressed an interest in renewing their rating since then.

Recruitment, Training and Technical Assistance

STEP improves early educator practice through training and/or coaching, provides incentives and supports for programs to meet and maintain higher program standards, and provides benchmarks to determine if the quality of care in individual programs or communities is improving over time.

STEP successfully planned and implemented the following outreach and training activities:

- Recruited over 180 new family child care homes and child care centers to its QRIS network.

STEP Facts at a Glance

Year launched as a pilot:
2007

Lead administrative agency:
Los Angeles County Office of Child Care

FY 2012-13 budget:
\$1.2 million

Current and prior funders:

- California Community Foundation
- California Department of Education/ Child Development Division
- First 5LA
- Los Angeles County
- Los Angeles Universal Preschool

Key Operational Partners:

- Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies
- Department of Social Services
- Community Care Licensing Division (CCLD)
- UCLA Center for Improving Child Care Quality (CICQ)

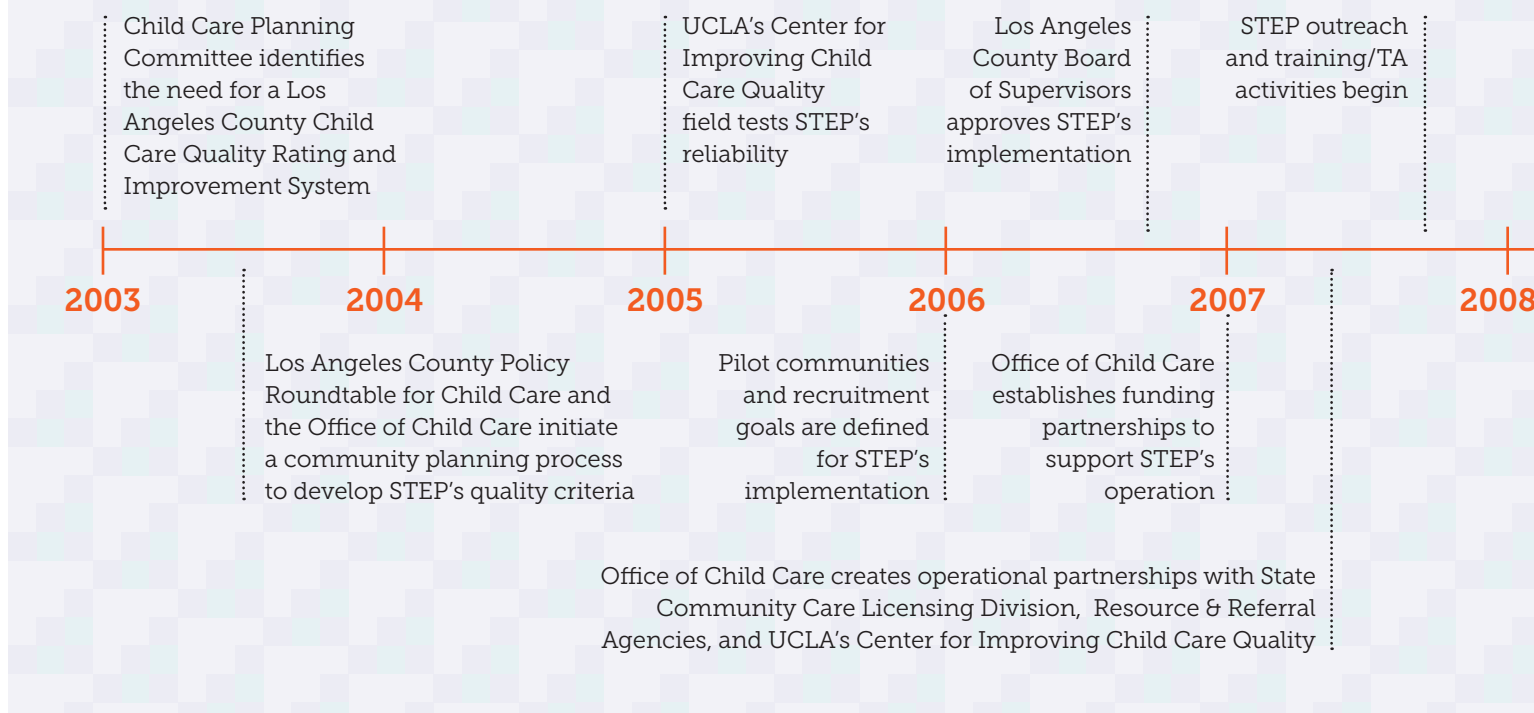
No. of participating Child Care Programs:
245

No. of child care quality ratings completed in FY 2012-13:
158

Awards received:

- 2010 National Association of Counties Achievement Award
- 2010 California State Association of Counties Merit Award
- 2010 Los Angeles County Quality and Productivity Commission Merit Award

STEP Historical Timeline



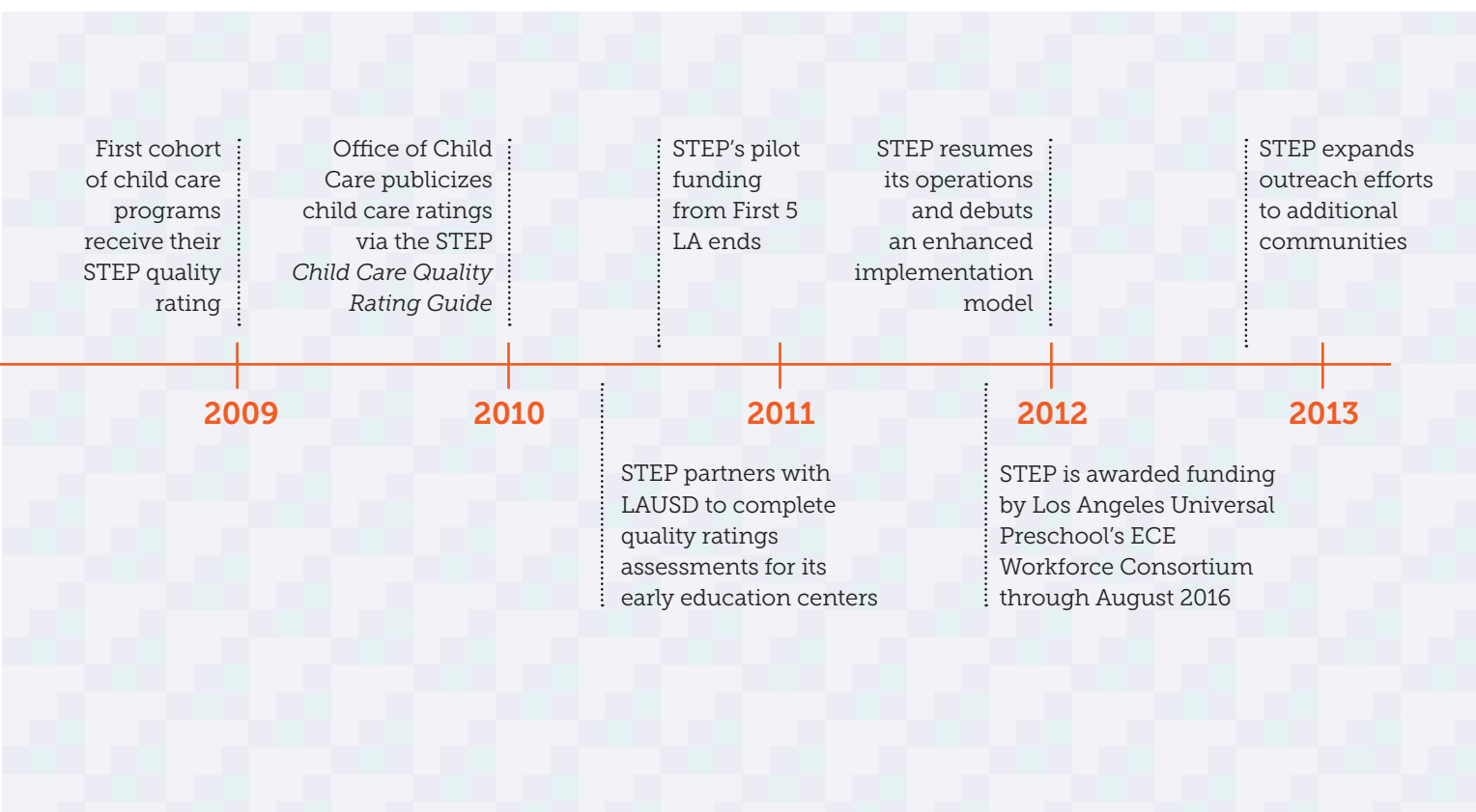
- Extended its services to seven new communities including Boyle Heights, Granada Hills, Lancaster, Mission Hills, San Fernando (city), Torrance, and Watts/Willowbrook, bringing the total number of communities served by STEP to 18. Please refer to the map on page 12 showing STEP communities in relation to Service Planning Areas (SPAs) and Supervisorial Districts.
- Provided orientation and training services to 159 early educators in 34 sessions; in addition, 57 early education providers received additional portfolio technical assistance in 13 sessions.
- Implemented 49 quality improvement trainings with attendance totaling 752 participants; trainings provided early education providers with information relevant to STEP's quality standards and about effective early childhood education (ECE) practices.
- Designed and launched a new peer-mentor program (STEP PAL) to develop leadership from the ECE field and provide support for STEP participants.

- Initiated a special partnership with the First 5 LA funded Project Vistas to increase connections and integrate services with other LAUP Consortia partners.

STEP Quality Improvement Grants

Child care programs that enroll in the STEP QRIS network receive one-time grants of up to \$5,000 to support quality improvements. Prior to receiving the grants, programs must (1) identify the related quality domain(s) for the desired change, (2) develop quality improvement plans, and (3) develop a corresponding budget that details how the money will be used.

- STEP awarded 58 quality improvement grants to participating child care programs this fiscal year that amounted to approximately \$286,000. The majority of STEP grant funds (80%) were allocated to improving the learning environment of participating child care programs.
- Over 90% of these awards were distributed to family child care homes—providers that have no access to any other quality improvement funding sources, despite accounting for a substantial portion of Los Angeles County's child care supply.



STEP Quality Ratings

STEP issues quality ratings based on data-driven assessments in each of the following six domains: (1) regulatory compliance, (2) teacher-child relationships, (3) learning environment, (4) identification and inclusion of children with special needs, (5) staff qualifications and working conditions, and (6) family and community connections.

During FY 2012-13, STEP completed 158 "preliminary", "full initial" and/or "renewal" ratings as shown in the following chart.

Type of STEP Rating	No. of Ratings Completed
Preliminary	124
Full (Initial)	31
Renewal	3
Totals	158

Among the 158 STEP sites that received a quality review, quality rating data available for this report included 107 sites, including 26 centers and 81 FCCs, rated by UCLA CICCQ through May 2013.

Ninety-three sites received preliminary reviews based solely on the observational measures and therefore only received scores for STEP domains 1 (Regulatory Compliance), 2 (Teacher/Child Relationships), and 3 (Learning Environment).

- For all programs (n=107) reviewed during 2012-13 and available for analysis, the average overall score in the Teacher-Child Relationship Domain was 3.47.
- For these same 107 programs, the average overall score in the Learning Environment Domain was 1.8 (see figure).

“The (STEP) program helped prioritize where to make improvements. Gave us the book FCCERS—showed us how to self-evaluate. They also did the pre-evaluation and that helped determine the areas to work on.”

An analysis of 16 family child care (FCC) sites receiving both a preliminary STEP review and a full STEP review using comparable observational measures from the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale (FCCERS) and Adult Involvement Scale (AIS) suggests some early improvements. Additional data showing changes in STEP ratings will be available after more programs receive their full initial rating.

- The average FCCERS item level scores across all 16 sites, measured at both time points, indicates that programs maintained or improved their preliminary ratings for 78% of items.
- Scores for teacher-child relationships using the AIS were not significantly different from the preliminary to full review. Approximately 31% of programs showed an increase in the STEP score while approximately 50% of programs scored the same at both time points.
- A majority of programs (69%) showed marked increases from preliminary to full review using the percent of time spent in responsive interactions as measured by the AIS. While this measure represents a small component of the overall AIS, it is movement in a positive direction.

Overall, the trends reflected in this early analysis are indicative of improvement among this sample of 16 programs that had preliminary and full reviews. These are encouraging results, but represent a small portion of the STEP sample and are not representative of all participating child care programs.



IMPACT OF STEP ON PARTICIPANTS

STEP participants were surveyed and interviewed about the impact of STEP on their programs, professional development, child development knowledge and practices, and other topics. Among 211 active program contacts, 72 or 34% completed an on-line survey. Survey participants were broadly representative of active participants: 38% completed the interview in Spanish; 21% joined STEP in the pilot phase, prior to 2011; 34% joined in 2012; and 44% in 2013. Consistent with this, over two-thirds (67%) of survey respondents reported having a preliminary STEP rating, and 32% had at least an initial STEP rating and represented the full range of STEP levels.

Overall Experience with STEP

Most child care providers reported positive experiences:

- Sixty-eight percent (68%) of respondents to the survey reported that their overall experience with STEP was “very positive” and 30% was “mostly positive” regardless of year of joining STEP or rating.
- Forty-seven percent (47%) “strongly agreed” and 38% “agreed” that they were prepared for the observation of their program.

Providers endorsed the benefits of STEP participation,

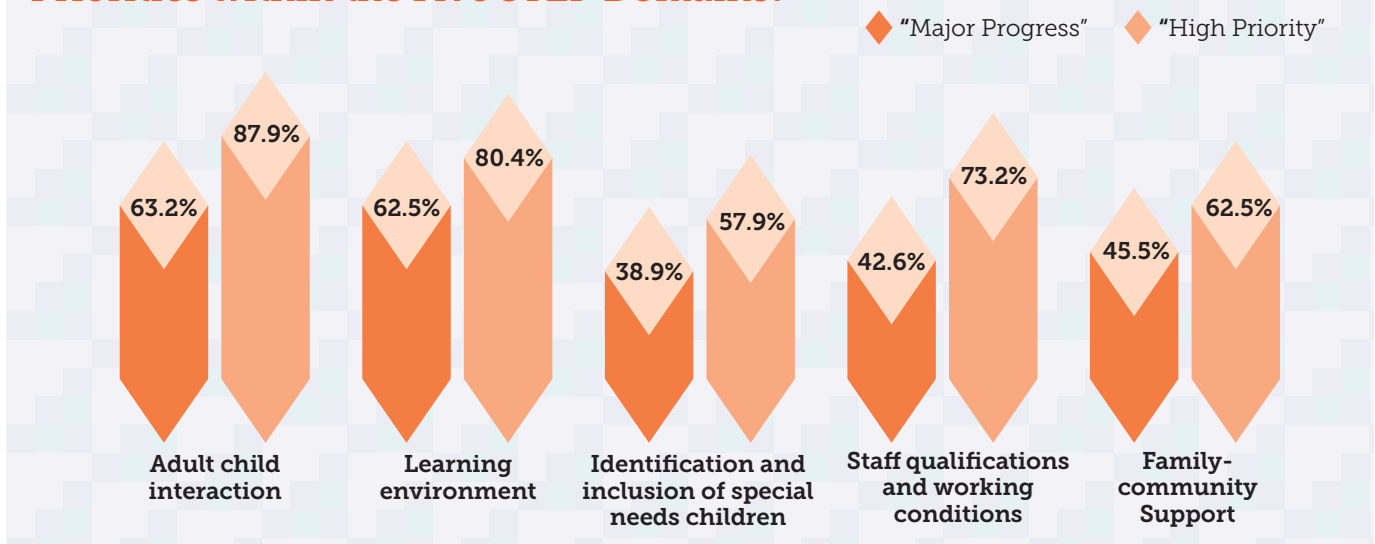
citing multiple and varied examples of the program improvements they had made, especially in the areas of the learning environment, use of developmental screening tools, and community and family relationships. These findings were consistent with high-levels of self-reported progress in the STEP domains.

- **A majority reported that STEP helped them prioritize improvement goals and understand quality standards;** this finding was supported in the interviews as providers



I've seen benefits...in my infant toddler area—just rearranging the space. The children are now able to get to things a lot easier; they don't always look to us to help them. They're more self driven because of how the space is being defined for them.”

How Did Participants Rate Their Progress and Priorities within the Five STEP Domains?



expressed the value of the assessments and coaching support in helping them to figure out areas of their program needing attention.

- **Professional growth was another positive benefit cited by STEP participants.** For program directors and staff, STEP provided a means for invigorating programs; managers reported that STEP helped them set a higher bar for quality practices and measure performance against those standards. Providers reported going back to school for credit and attending trainings, as well as leading workshops in the community.

Perhaps one of the strongest findings was that STEP participation builds community:

Providers reported interacting with other providers, and the learning, support, and community benefit from doing so.

- Eighty-eight percent (88%) met with other providers, 83% learned from other providers; 62% observed other programs; 44 providers completed an open-ended response asking how STEP had impacted their interactions with other child care providers, citing “learning exchanges”, sharing ideas, giving and receiving support, learning about resources for education and training, and building community to the extent that they viewed their network like a “family.”

“STEP was really helpful in motivating to get the staff credentialed. I see the value as an administrator...to look at what quality is by looking at the environmental rating scale, the adult interaction scale—it really helps to set a bar for the kind of quality we want in our program, and then training teachers to that level...I think that’s really helpful as an administrator.”

“It has helped me to have an open mind with learning new ways and new methods to put into practice with the kids.”

“I am going to keep doing this...going to [college] to register for my last three units. Before that, I didn’t have an idea about [what was] an ‘associate teacher’ and a ‘child development program’ so I’ve grown a lot professionally, and I know myself. I feel like I’m really doing the right thing now. Before I worked taking care of children, and I was teaching them, and I was trying to do my best, but not until you go to school and really learn the steps. And they show you the best way, and then you understand it [how]...to teach kids the right way.”

“It’s taught us that there are things we believed we did well, but were wrong. Partners give us suggestions about how to advance and provide/ improve quality of service.”

Family child care homes and nonsubsidized centers are also referred to the Gateways for Early Educators Program (Gateways), another initiative funded through the Los Angeles County ECE Workforce Consortium, for quality improvement coaching services. All participating programs are also invited to attend STEP-sponsored quality improvement trainings that address STEP’s quality domains.

Overall satisfaction with Gateways and STEP resources were high, and most rated the value of these resources as high for making program improvements.

Marketing, Communication, and Enrollment

Few providers from the interviews have used their STEP participation to market their programs, although many plan to do so. Similarly, just 28% of survey respondents reported using STEP participation to market their programs, though nearly one-half (48%) reported planning to do so; 12% were not planning to use STEP in marketing their programs.

Some providers reported that STEP participation helped them increase (20%) or maintain (25%) their enrollment, with the enrollment of the remaining 55% not impacted.

Many of those interviewed want materials to share with parents, internet-based tools and links to include on their websites, and other information. Several suggest using the internet, social marketing and networking tools to accelerate communications among providers but also with the public. They want people to know what STEP participation means.

Providers interviewed found creative ways to communicate with parents and the broader community and offered several good suggestions in addition to using the internet and tools such as Facebook pages. Many interviewed said they are out in the community more, talking with clinics and other community organizations to “let them know we’re here” and finding ways to collaborate.

Satisfaction with the Rating Process and Future Plans

The overall level of satisfaction with the rating process was mostly high. For 59% of survey respondents, the first rating (preliminary or full)

accurately reflected their program's strengths and areas for improvement; 27% thought their first rating "mostly" reflected the same; 15% did not feel their first rating accurately reflected their program.

Surveys and interviews also surfaced a few somewhat negative experiences with the rating process; for example, the quality rater disregarding something the provider posted electronically, but was not included in their portfolio. Although a small proportion of respondents considered their rating to be inaccurate, these observations merit attention.

Intentions to have their program rated in the future was strong, with 89% of providers intending to have a future rating and 11% responding "don't know," and did not vary among programs with a full initial or preliminary rating only. This finding varied little by year of joining STEP, ranging from 84% among those joining prior to 2011 to 92% among those joining in 2013.

Knowledge and Culture of Continuous Quality Improvement

Respondents assessed their increases in knowledge regarding several key topics in the STEP model including two-thirds or more reporting "big increases in knowledge" in the following areas: Quality learning environments (72%); High-quality developmental screening tools (72%); Building positive relationships with children (68%); Professional development for yourself / employees (66%); and Going back to school to get teaching permit or credentials (62%).

Participants overwhelmingly expressed confidence that participation in STEP will help their programs improve the quality of services provided to children and families: 84% indicated that they were "very confident," 11% were "mostly confident," and 5% were "somewhat confident" or "not confident" or answered "don't know."

"I've been going out to different places and letting them know we're here. Asking them about their services and seeing if we can partner up with anything. For next year, I'm planning to partner with the [local] Clinic...they're going to come out with the mobile (van); and then we have a dental office here and they're going to provide free services to children... my quality coach has given me some leads in letting me know what's out there...so that's been helpful."

"As a tool for families, we have hopes for STEP to help educate current families—we're able to talk with them about what we did and what it meant and what does quality look like—but...one of my concerns is that we haven't received the marketing material, public relations materials that we thought we were going to get to educate new families coming in—like the new rating sign and things...that we had hoped would be a part of it as a consumer tool, so that all families would have the opportunity to be a part of this and get the information about quality."



“We have bonded in a very special way and, at the same time, we have grown and learned together. Honestly, we see and treat each other as family. Thank you.”

“As I understood it, the intent was for it to be like restaurant ratings. There would be that kind of level of awareness—you know, when you go to a restaurant you look for the rating on the restaurant. So it really needs a broad consumer education strategy around it.”



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation revealed multiple strengths, including positive provider experiences participating in STEP, beneficial training and coaching support from Gateways, valuable support from program staff, and positive progress toward quality improvements for a majority of child care providers.

The evaluation also revealed areas in need of attention, including the development of marketing strategies and materials to promote STEP and quality-rated providers. The findings also suggest an opportunity to explore a constellation of concerns that surfaced among a few that were associated with low ratings, including negative feelings about the fairness, completeness, or expectations around the rating process, as such concerns may impact retention. The following recommendations emerged:

- Explore low-cost marketing strategies, including social media and an improved presence on the Internet. For example, establish a Facebook page, update the website, and identify quality-rated providers. These strategies are relatively low cost and may have valuable potential benefits. In addition, social media could provide another means of facilitating community building and interaction among child care providers.
- Consider producing a poster, logo, and other materials that can be displayed at program sites and web pages. Providers expressed strong support for quality rating, associating it with what's best for children and with being accredited. Most want to use that distinction and the accomplishment of program completion to support their businesses.
- Providers are very interested in having access to materials that provide parent-friendly explanations of the STEP ratings and their relationship to quality in child care. While providers seem confident that they are able to explain what quality means (to parents or throughout the community), the interviews noted the potential value of producing such information to broaden awareness of quality rating and why it is important.
- Explore a strategy for branding “quality rated” programs, something along the lines of “Zagat rated” so as to not make the actual score as prominent, yet retain the integrity of the step-by-step progression. While most participants welcome the public information, there are some who will want their participation rather than their rating highlighted. This may have the added benefit of improved program retention.
- Collect timely feedback about rating experience and receipt of results. Such feedback would likely be more accurate information and would provide a basis for responding to concerns.

County of Los Angeles

Supervisory Districts, Service Planning Areas and STEP Communities

